# TOUGH ENOUGH

## MANORAMA SURVIVES TO TELL HER TALE

It was toughgoing. She was nearly on the streets.

But now the crisis has passed. Manorama has survived the onslaught of age and no-jobs, thanks considerably to TV serials and of course, her own indomitable fighting spirit. She's, as they say, a tough cookie.

Once while shooting in Panchgani for a bit part she'd managed to scrounge in Mahesh Bhatt's *Junoon*, she had sighed, "I've had a bath in a decent bathroom after a long, long time."

The sometimes-hard and the sometimes good-luck story of the 70-year-old character actress Manorama Daniel is perhaps symptomatic of Mumbai show business. You can never tell when you'll be lionised and when you'll be shunned like a pariah.

Manorama, the eye-narrowing termagant of the *masala* movies like *Dus Lakh*, *Bombay To Goa* and *Seeta Aur Geeta*, has survived to narrate her *kabhi-khushi-kabhi-bahut-hi-gham* tale.

Right now, there seems to be quite a lot of *khushi* in the Marol apartment of her daughter. Still roly-poly and amplifier-voiced, her hair is freshly hennaed and her *salwar-kameez* crisply ironed..

Lighting up a State Express cigarette nonchalantly, she exhales, "For nearly 15 years I was jobless. It was sheer hell. Surely as in Hollywood there should be a fund for senior artistes here. We've given our blood, sweat and tears to the film industry. Shouldn't its leaders come to our aid?"

At the age of nine in 1940, she started off as a child artiste... and claims to have acted in 500 films in the course of nearly six decades.

Manorama recounts her bio snappily: "My mother was Irish and my father was an Indian Christian... Roop K. Sheorey spotted me at a school concert in Lahore where I was born and brought up. My father, a professor in an engineering college, was broad-minded. My maiden name Erin was changed by Mr Sheorey to Manorama."

In her first film, *Khazanchi*, she played S.D. Narang's younger sister. She graduated to playing the lead and supporting parts but it seems she couldn't accept offers from V. Shantaram and Mehboob Khan because she had been bound by Sheorey to a five-year contract.

Manorama insists she was a proficient classical singer and dancer who performed at stage shows in the 1940s, some of them under the aegis of the Red Cross. Although the tickets were pricey, the shows were

S.N.KULKARNI

always "sold out", beams Lady M.

Her eyes twinkle as she rewinds, "Once at Peshawar, a dozen armed Afridis threatened to kidnap me if they weren't allowed to watch my show. The tickets were already sold out. Finally my father intervened and had chairs put in the wings for them. The next morning, they turned up at the station with *tokras* of fruit and *mithai* for our journey."

Manorama was a popular heroine earning Rs 10,000 a month in Lahore when the pre-Partition riots broke out. "Ten thousand bucks would be equivalent to around Rs 20 lakhs a month today!" she

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booms.

With Partition, she moved to Bombay where she knew only one film personality—actor Chandramohan. "I was miserable, I almost returned to Lahore," she flashbacks. "But Chandramohan told me to hang on. Thank god, if I'd caught the train that day, I'd have been finished. Not a single passenger on that train survived. Everyone was massacred," she shivers.

Chandramohan recommended Manorama to film-makers. And although she toted a superhit with the Punjabi film *Lacchi*, she was subsequently relegated to playing sister to Dilip Kumar in *Ghar Ki Izzat* (1948).

After her marriage to actor Rajan Haksar, she was slotted in character roles and then to the stereotype of an evil, scheming busybody. The downturn came when 'family subjects' were fazed out by film-makers. "Today's movies have nothing but *maar dhaad* and *naach gaana*," she complains. "How can there be any roles for me when there's no story?"

She was last seen in a substantial role in Akbar Khan's *Haadsaa* (1983). She did shoot for Mahesh Bhatt's *Junoon* (1992) but her role was snipped on the editing table. Followed a total eclipse.

According to Manorama, even in her salad days, she was cheated of roles. "I was a simple soul I guess. I never partied like Shashikala and Nadira. Honestly, my life has been an open book. Maybe a few pages are missing. But I sleep well because I've never harmed anyone."

She continues, "I had quite a few enemies but I forgive them. They know who they are. It was well-known that I never cut my price. Other actresses offered to do them for peanuts just to be in with the producers."

Television turned the tide for Manorama. She shifted to Delhi for five years to work in TV serials and the telefilm *Dastak* which featured Shah Rukh Khan. When the serial-scene shifted to Mumbai, Manorama returned.

"I approached film-makers who were making software for TV," she narrates. "All of them were very encouraging at the outset. But I was out of sight, out of mind, the moment I left their office. Only Balaji Telefilms called me up and that too the very next day. I owe my survival to Shobha and Ekta Kapoor," she says gratefully.

At the moment she's working in their serials *Kashti* and *Kundli*. "By the grace of God, I shoot for eight to ten days a month. *Abhi* bread-butter *chal raha hai*," she gurgles and adds, "My cousin Samuel, who's been with me all along, keeps me company and looks after my work too. He was a kid when I was shooting for *Bombay To Goa*."

Rajan Haksar and Manorama divorced. Candidly she admits, "I did try hard to make our marriage work for ten years. But it was no go. We did remain friends... till he passed away two years ago."

Their elder daughter, Reeta Haksar, is settled in the Gulf with her husband, an engineer. Reeta played the lead opposite Sanjeev Kumar in *Suraj Aur Chanda*, only to quit the movies soon after.

Manorama was looking forward to essaying an important role in Deepa Mehta's *Water*. "It's a pity, it won't get made," says the veteran M.

But then that's the story of Manorama. Lose some, win some... because tomorrow is another day.

***Meera Joshi***